

Book Review: “The Living Universe: Where Are We, Who Are We, Where Are We Going?” by Duane Elgin

Chiara D’Amore
Prescott College
cdamore@prescott.edu

Abstract: In *The Living Universe: Where are We, Who are We, and Where are We Going*, Duane Elgin presents a powerfully compelling argument that the most fundamental challenge facing humanity during this time of crisis is to visualize a future of great opportunity and that the foundational story guiding the reality people create on Earth is whether the universe is alive and to be loved and nurtured or dead and to be feared and consumed. This article provides a review of this powerful book with an eye to the connection between love and sustainability.

Keywords: love, cosmophilia, human journey, sustainability

Author Biography: Chiara D’Amore is a doctoral candidate in the Sustainability Education Program at Prescott College, Toyota-Audubon TogetherGreen Fellow, and founder of Columbia Families in Nature. Her research interests focus on the importance of the human connection with the natural environment for personal, societal, and environmental well-being. Chiara has more than a decade of experience working as an environmental consultant and has a Master’s degree in Environmental Science and Engineering as well as Bachelor’s degrees in Biology and International Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Most meaningfully, she is the mother of two young children. Chiara can be reached at cdamore@prescott.edu

Throughout history, and in all cultures, people have turned to the imaginative possibilities of story for knowledge transfer and also to facilitate engagement during times of change, crisis, and celebration. Stories shape the ways we think and help us define what is possible. As we face immense, interconnected social and ecological crises, it is increasingly important to understand the existing stories that are underpinning the crises and the stories that can be nurtured and shared to help create a positive path forward. In *The Living Universe: Where are We, Who are We, and Where are We Going*, Duane Elgin presents a powerfully compelling argument that the most fundamental challenge facing humanity during this time of crisis is to visualize a future of great opportunity and that the foundational story guiding the reality people create on Earth is whether the universe is alive and to be loved and nurtured or dead and to be feared and consumed.

As the title suggests, this book is organized into three primary sections focused on the questions of where are we, who are we, and where are we going. Inquiry into these questions is a passion for Elgin, who grew up on a farm in big sky country Idaho, an environment that created an early connection to and wonder of the "miracle of aliveness". A sense of identity rooted in the land has nourished Elgin's life work as a scholar, educator, and activist dedicated to creating a global vision, consciousness and lifestyle that fosters a more sustainable and spiritual culture. He has done substantive research on long-range futures through work on a presidential-congressional commission on the American future. While working with a progressive think tank Elgin was a subject in NASA's earliest psychic research, which gave him direct experience in experiments that explored whether the universe is a living system. During this time Elgin was also intensely engaged in a Buddhist meditation practice. The cumulative impact was a transformative experience documented in his earlier book, *Awakening Earth*, and an enhanced focus on advocacy for creative change which was shared in his book *Voluntary Simplicity*. Elgin's most recent book, *The Living Universe*, is grounded in the "confidence of these years of combined inner and outer inquiry." Throughout the book Elgin draws on and integrates sciences such as physics, biology, and cosmology as well as the wisdom of indigenous cultures, philosophies, and religions spanning the ages and the globe. Having received Elgin's mentorship in a course on "Cultural and Transitional Narratives for Sustainability", I am pleased to share this overview of "The Living Universe". It is a profound book, touching on great depths of the universe and humanity's place within it.

The first section of the book, "Where are we?" explores the core question of whether the universe is living or dead. Elgin argues that our belief regarding whether the universe is living or dead has "profound implications for whether we experience life with feelings of alienation or belonging, see it as pointless or purposeful, and regard it with feelings of indifference or reverence" (p.3). Therefore, this foundational story about the universe creates the context within which humanity understands who we are, the journey we are on, and creates our collective future.

Elgin begins by comparing the dead and alive universe views. The mechanistic view of a non-living universe originated approximately 300 years ago with the Enlightenment. Since this time, mainstream science has understood the universe to be comprised almost entirely of empty space and inert matter and condemned other perspectives as a regression into superstition. With non-living matter as the foundation of the universe, life on Earth seems to have emerged almost as a cosmic accident as matter happened to organize into increasingly complex forms – from elements to atoms to molecules to cells to organisms. Elgin suggests that the dead universe view

reduces all of existence to being purely physical, with human consciousness being a biological phenomenon of the brain and love and happiness being chemical reactions of the body. People, planets, stars, and the universe will all eventually die, having had no higher meaning or purpose and leaving no legacy. Under this paradigm, it is logical to perceive people as the most highly evolved form of life in the known universe, making it justifiable to treat the rest of the natural world as a resources best used to provide us with material possessions, power, pleasure and prestige, which are the society-driven focus of our lives.

In stark contrast to the dead universe perspective, the living universe paradigm held by all wisdom traditions sees the universe as “buzzing with invisible energy and aliveness, patiently growing a garden of cosmic scale” (p.xii) and humans as a precious channel through which the living universe sees, knows, feels, and learns. Through this lens, one can experience “cosmophilia” or kinship with the totality of nature and connection with the harmony and beauty of the universe. As we learn to live ever more consciously in a living universe, what matters most is not matter, but the aliveness within ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us. “Where a dead universe perspective generates disconnect and despair, a living universe perspective generates inspiring and resilient visions of a higher pathway for humanity” (P. xiii). Throughout the book, Elgin critically explores whether this affirming view of the future is justified.

Chapter one is dedicated to creating an expansive framework for thinking about ourselves, the universe, and our relationship. Elgin believes that as part of a living universe humanity is on an intentional evolutionary journey of awakening in which the initial phase was to separate ourselves from nature to develop our sense of individuality and empowerment. We have been so successful in this task that we are now dramatically disrupting the viability of the Earth’s systems as well as our social systems. To reconnect with our rightful place in a living universe, Elgin considers four observations from science: in the overall scale of the known universe people are actually enormous – there is more smallness within us than bigness beyond us; nearly all of the universe is invisible, undetectable, and currently unknown; from a cosmological perspective we are only at the beginning of evolution; and people have the capacity to have an intuitive connection with the cosmos. Together these insights lead Elgin to suggest a new and empowering view of ourselves, the universe, and the human journey - that “people are giants, living in a mostly invisible universe, who are just getting underway in our evolutionary journey and can reach with our consciousness into the larger universe” (p. 26).

Chapter two leverages science to explore whether the universe has the basic characteristics of a living entity. Elgin is clear that he is not seeking to prove that the universe is a living system; rather available evidence points strongly in the direction of a living universe. He puts forward six criteria for considering whether the universe is alive: is it unified; is energy flowing throughout; is it being continuously regenerated; is there sentience or consciousness throughout; is there freedom of choice; is it able to reproduce itself? These criteria are explored in depth by pulling from fields such as physics, cosmology and biology. The picture of the universe that emerges is that of a “unified and completely interdependent system that is continuously regenerated by the flow-through of phenomenal amounts of life energy whose essential nature includes consciousness or a self-reflective capacity that enables systems at every scale of existence to exercise some freedom of choice... [and] has the ability to reproduce itself via black holes that provide the seed instructions for growing new cosmic systems” (p.55). In other words, based on scientific evidence, the universe appears to meet the key criteria of aliveness.

The "Who are we?" section of the book delves into the question of who we are as a species – purely physical beings in a struggle for material survival or beings that are connected to a universe in which we have a deep purpose and vast potential? Chapter 3 weaves together insights from the world's major religious and wisdom traditions to explore who we are in relation to the universe. Elgin draws from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Indigenous cultures, and western worldviews to "harvest the wisdom of human experience" (p.80). He finds common streams of experience and descriptions of the universe being described by wisdom traditions from around the world and across the ages. In short, these traditions all recognize that we exist within a living universe that is continuously sustained by phenomenal amounts of energy and that seamlessly arises anew, moment by moment, as a unified whole. This understanding is in accord with the emerging scientific understanding of the universe presented in chapter two and points to the existence of extraordinarily powerful, generative ground, or *Mother Universe*, from which our universe continuously emerges.

Chapter 4 merges both science and wisdom to consider how a Mother Universe can contain countless daughter universes, including our own. Elgin's exploration of the generative life force that is able to hold our universe as a living system brings forth six key attributes of the Mother Universe. She is: present everywhere, non-obstructing, utterly impartial, ultimately ungraspable, made of unconditional love, and profoundly creative. As such "the Mother Universe has existed forever, holding countless daughter universes in her grand embrace while they grow and mature throughout an eternity of time" (p.90). This perspective allows us to shift from existing in a lifeless, meaningless universe to a unified, living universe "whose purpose it is to support, in freedom, the growth of self-reflective and self-organizing entities and communities at every scale" (p. 91). As such, the evolving experience of humanity can be understood as an expression of the infinite potential of the Mother Universe.

Chapter 5 explores our soulful nature as cosmic beings learning to live in a living universe. Once again Elgin brings together scientific research and wisdom traditions to illuminate the qualities of the human soul. He posits that we are on Earth to discover our remarkable true nature because the physical world provides us with innumerable opportunities to encounter ourselves with clarity. Said differently, our bodies are biodegradable vehicles for acquiring soul-growing experiences. Therefore, the essential purpose of our lives is to become intimate friends with ourselves and to grow as a stream of light, love, music and knowing – the four qualities of the soul. As "boundless beings whose participation in the deep ecology of the universe is limited only by the scope of our conscious awareness", such an intention cultivates the body of knowing that lives and moves within the Mother Universe (p.95).

The "Where are we going?" section of the book investigates whether there is a discernible direction to the evolution of life. The focus of chapter 6 is to explore whether the universe has an evolutionary direction and, if so, how humanity's journey aligns with it. Once again pulling from cutting edge science, Elgin provides evidence that the universe is "busy with one overriding project – creating and sustaining dynamically stable entities" (p.120). For example, the torus is a reoccurring, reflexive, organizing pattern of dynamic stability that can be found at every level of the universe in places such as the magnetic fields of people and the Earth as well as the air currents in a tornado and the curvature of space around a black hole. In exploring the most basic properties of self-organizing systems found throughout the cosmos, Elgin summarizes that the "universe is rolling out self-reflective systems at the local scale that are able to join in communities are larger scales that offer the opportunity for learning and creative expression in a

context of ever-broadening freedom” (p.123). As a life form that is literally able to look back at themselves and the universe, the human journey is a “direct expression of the central project of the cosmos” (p.122).

Chapter 7 looks at where humanity is on our journey of collective awakening. Elgin explores what he sees as humanity’s journey from separation to initiation to communion. Since awakening to ourselves as hunter gatherers approximately 35,000 years ago, humanity has been on a path of separation, from nature, each other, and ourselves. Through our transitions into agrarian lifestyles 10,000 years ago, urban/industrial lifestyles approximately 300 years ago, and now the revolution in electronic communication of the past 50 years, we have become profoundly disconnected from nature and the subtle life-force of the universe. However, Elgin sees our “progressive separation from nature as integral to our learning and maturation as a species” as it was necessary for us “to achieve a distinct and empowered sense of self as material beings” (P.138). However, we are now at a crucial point of separation where the entire process of our evolution must begin to bend back and consciously reflect upon itself in order for us to eventually return to a relationship with the universe at a new level of understanding. Made increasingly visible by the communications revolution, healing the unprecedented and mounting ecological and social crises of our time are our supreme test. Our task is to “grow consciously into this new world and learn to live in balance with the Earth, in peace with one another, and in gratitude with the living universe” (p. 139).

Elgin closes the book with a section on actions for the journey ahead. He has identified six actions that are vital for making the unprecedented evolutionary turn to begin our journey back to communion with a living universe. These are: co-creating our story of awakening; cultivating reflection and reconciliation (through meditation and conversation); living simply and sustainably; creating new kinds of community; becoming media conscious citizens of the Earth; and bringing our true gifts into the world. After reading such a rich, deep, and provoking book, this section is essential for regrounding the reader in practical, accessible actions that they can immediately take in their lives and grow over time. In particular, the exploration of near gifts, things that we are good at doing, and true gifts, our greatest, unique talents, can help us each to identify the action we want to take on behalf of the Earth and in service of creating a vibrant future for humanity.

Throughout this book Elgin seamlessly blends narrative inquiry from his own experience with textual research to support the theory that humanity is deeply connected to a living universe. Acknowledging his personal story and experience and using it to accent the complex science and robust wisdom literature that he weaves together makes for compelling reading. The presentation of tremendous evidence from numerous fields and traditions that supports the idea of humanity and our journey on Earth as an intentional, integral part of a living universe is both inspiring and humbling. There is great work to be done to create a vibrant and sustainable human presence on Earth and this book is a powerful touchstone for our journey.

Images

